

# Advent 4



## Prayer of the Day

Stir up your power, O Lord, and come. Take away the hindrance of our sins and make us ready for the celebration of your birth, that we may receive you in joy and serve you always; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever.

The tradition that the last Sunday in Advent anticipates Christmas rather than the Second Coming is continued in this adaptation of the traditional collect for the day. This prayer, like those for Advent 1, 2 and the alternate for 3, addresses Christ directly and in the second person singular.

## Micah 5:2-5a

{2} But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. {3} Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. {4} And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; {5} and he shall be the one of peace.

2. *Bethlehem of Ephrathah*: Genesis 35:19; 48:7: the place of Rachel's burial; Ruth 1:2: Elimelech, Naomi, Mahlon and Chilion were Ephrathites from Bethlehem; also Ruth 4:11. 1 Samuel 17:12, "Now David was the son of an Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah, named Jesse," makes explicit the association of Bethlehem, Ephrathah, and the royal house of David. Following the exile the Davidic line will be restored and a new ruler will emerge from that ancient lineage.

*one of the little clans of Judah*: This description of Bethlehem "emphasizes the marvel of God's intervention, who brings forth a man to save his people from the most unlikely and unexpected quarter. From such an unlikely source shall emerge one who will specifically belong to YHWH..." [1]

3. *she who is in labor*: A reference to the exile and dispersion of the people of Judah.

4. *he shall stand and feed his flock*: The new ruler promised in verse 2 shall perform his royal duties as the shepherd of his people; he will protect them and provide for them and guide them in ways that will bless them.

*in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God*: The ruler will act not by his own power, but as an agent of Yahweh and by his power.

*they shall live secure*: The people will no longer suffer exile and shame; instead they shall be secure and safe.

5. *he shall be the one of peace*: Though the meaning of the Hebrew is not certain, this translation identifies the new king as one who will rule in *Shalom*, peace. By the power of Yahweh the ruler will establish harmony and wholeness for the people and will maintain their security and safety.

**Comment:** Some would divide the passage differently (e.g. 5:1-4 with 5 beginning a new pericope), but as it stands in the lectionary the reading draws together the motifs of Davidic descent, Bethlehem as a location for a new revelation of Yahweh's authority, and themes of provision, protection, and guidance, and the return and restoration of the people from exile.

## Luke 1:47-55

{47} My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, {48} for he has looked with

favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; {49} for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. {50} His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. {51} He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. {52} He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; {53} he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. {54} He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, {55} according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Like the Prayer of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10) the Song of Mary celebrates the reversals that God has promised. He will turn the order of human society upside down. The proud and the rich will be overthrown and the hungry and lowly will be exalted. In Mark 14:9 an unnamed woman will be remembered because she anointed Jesus' body for burial.

*49. all generations will call me blessed:* In Psalm 45:17 the singer promises to celebrate the king's name "to all generations."

*50. those who fear him:* This is a frequent term in the Psalms for those whom Yahweh favors (e.g. Psalms 22:25; 25:14; 33:18; etc.). This is the only use of the expression in the New Testament.

*from generation to generation:* The expression means "forever." See the parallelism in Psalm 79:13, and the use of the two expressions together in Psalm 106:31. This is the only use of the expression in the New Testament.

*55. to Abraham and to his descendants:* Abraham was blessed by Yahweh and was intended to be a blessing not only to the chosen people but also to all the families of the earth (Genesis 12:3).

**Comment:** Luke 1:47-55, the "Psalm" for Advent 4C is also an optional part of the Gospel for this Sunday, and the Psalm for Advent 3B.

**Or**

### **Psalm 80:1-7**

{1} Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth {2} before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us! {3} Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved. {4} O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers? {5} You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure. {6} You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves. {7} Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

The Psalm takes up the themes of Isaiah, praying for the salvation and restoration of Israel.

1. The expressions "Shepherd of Israel" and "lead...like a flock" express a metaphor of the relationship between Yahweh and his people.

*enthroned upon the cherubim:* God set cherubim to guard the way to the tree of life (Genesis 3:24). Two cherubim were on the cover of the Ark of the Covenant, and Yahweh spoke from the "mercy seat: which was above and between the cherubim The "im" ending is the Hebrew plural.

2. *Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh:* The central northern Israelite tribes are in great distress and turmoil. It is probably the Assyrian conquest that is intended. [2]

3, 7: A refrain that is also repeated in verse 19, which is omitted from the reading. The refrain prays for God's face to shine, as in the Aaronic benediction (Numbers 6:25; and frequently in the Psalms, e.g. Psalm 46; 67:1, etc.). This is a metaphor for God's favorable attention to the activities and needs of his people. Specifically, the prayer is for restoration (from exile) and salvation.

**Comment:** In year B the Psalm for Advent 1 is Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19.

## Hebrews 10:5-10

{5} Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; {6} in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. {7} Then I said, 'See, God, I have come to do your will, O God' (in the scroll of the book it is written of me)." {8} When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), {9} then he added, "See, I have come to do your will." He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. {10} And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

*5. Sacrifices and offerings...a body you have prepared for me:* This is the first citation of Psalm 40:6-8, which is interpreted in terms of the Christ. These words are supposed to have been spoken "by the pre-incarnate Son to the Father. They give the reason for the Incarnation." [3] See John 6:38 for another expression of Jesus' purpose in doing the Father's will.

*7, 9. I have come to do your will:* By his willingness to do God's will Christ offers himself in place of sacrifices and offerings as the means by which we are sanctified.

A similar thought is expressed in an ancient Christian hymn: "Christ Jesus...did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:5-8). This is also the way of the Christian; that the same mind that was in Christ will also be in us.

## Luke 1:39-45 [46-55]

{39} In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, {40} where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. {41} When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit {42} and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. {43} And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? {44} For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. {45} And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." [{46} And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, {47} and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, {48} for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; {49} for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. {50} His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. {51} He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. {52} He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; {53} he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. {54} He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, {55} according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."]

"All is topsy-turvy here, at least according to ancient standards. A young girl should not be traveling alone in her own hometown, much less across country—but here is Mary doing so. Young girls do not receive blessings from old women, but Mary is honored by Elizabeth. Men are generally not privy to prenatal women-speak, but this private exchange is now broadcast to Luke's readers. News of this magnitude would come from Jerusalem, the holy city, and the Temple, the divine abode—but this newsworthy episode is situated in the Judean hill country. And men should be the first to know and speak of the work of God and to confirm the angelic message—but in Luke's narrative this deed falls to an old, secluded, pregnant woman." [4]

*41b-42. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry:* This is the description of a prophet, and of a prophet's actions. Elizabeth recognizes Mary's status and blesses her and her to-be-born-child.

*the child leaped in her womb:* This phenomena is mentioned in verse 44. John recognized Jesus when both of them were still in the womb. Later John seems to doubt his own

prophetic powers. He sent his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (Luke 7:19).

42-45: Elizabeth greets her kinswoman (1:36) with a blessing as one who "believed...what was spoken to her by the Lord." Elizabeth knows "what was spoken to her," by revelation since she has not been told what had been said.

[46-55 Mary's song (the form is poetic) may also have appeared as the Psalm for the day. She rejoices that Yahweh has looked on her with favor, and she generalizes the inversion of honor she has experienced into a principle by which God will judge human society: the proud will be scattered, the powerful reduced and the rich dismissed, the lowly will be promoted, and the hungry will be filled. Israel, once exiled and reviled will be restored, and the promise to Abraham will be fulfilled.]

55. *the promise he (Yahweh) made to... Abraham*: The confidence expressed in this passage in God's grace is grounded in the covenant with Abraham, a unilateral covenant in which Yahweh bases his blessing of Abraham and his descendants, not on Abraham's worthiness, but on Yahweh's own sovereign decision. Mary's song anticipates God's action in Christ.

**Comment:** "a typical Israelite feature: God knows his prophets even before they are born, and he consecrates and calls them from their mother's womb (see Jer. 1:5; Isa. 19:1; Gal. 1:15-16)." [5]

## Reflection

"When this Sunday occurs on December 24, its theme and color are observed until evening when the theme and color for Christmas are used." [6]

The time of waiting and preparing for the Advent of our Lord now comes to an end with the assurance that God will now come to his people in the birth of Mary's child. We pray that we may receive our Lord with joy and serve him always.

Though the entry of God's power into the world in the way of powerlessness is contrary to our expectations, it is nonetheless God's way. God's way will lead to the cross in an even more mysterious demonstration of grace. If we would walk with Christ we will seek to avoid the way of the Cross at our peril

Jeopardy must certainly be involved whenever Christians or the church find common cause with those who seek wealth or power in the world. We ask the question, "If Christians or the church seek to succeed according to the methods and values of the world, do they jeopardize God's intentions and plans, or do they jeopardize only their participation in the fulfillment of those intentions and plans?" Yahweh says, "my word...shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11), so the conclusion is clear. This is not a threat or even a warning, but rather an statement of the obvious. "Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world" (1 John 4:17).

## Hymns [7]

*With One Voice* (e.g. 762v), *Hymnal Supplement* 1991 (e.g. 725s) and *LBW* (e.g. 32).

E=Entrance; D=Hymn of the Day; I=First Lesson, P=Psalm; II=Second Lesson; G=Gospel

30 --E--Come, Thou Long  
180 --D--My Soul Now  
28 --D--Saviour of the  
61 --I--The Hills Are  
58 --I--Lo, How a Rose

730v --P--My Soul Proclaims  
634v --P--Sing of Mary (756s)  
692v --G--For All the Faithful  
632v --G--The Angel Gabriel  
6, 818s, 170 (st. 2), 41, 198

## Prayers of the People [8]

P or A: Our God is almighty and all powerful, yet, in compassion, enters our fallen world to bring salvation and everlasting life. For God's grace, we express our wonder and praise in the words of Mary, praying, "You have done great things, O God." and responding, "**Holy is your name.**"

A: For the whole church, that it may ever appreciate your creation of a holy people through the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ. You have done great things, O God. **Holy...**

A: For all men and women who serve our federal and provincial governments, that they may lead with fairness and integrity, and be moved to address problems of poverty, inequality, and environmental destruction. You have done great things, O God. **Holy...**

A: For all who are stressed and anxious in a rushed and frantic season, that they may hear your promise of peace and salvation through all distractions. You have done great things, O God. **Holy...**

A: For this congregation, that we might trust in the coming reign of Christ, though we have not yet witnessed it with our eyes. As your servant Mary trusted the angel's message of her unseen child, grant us faith to live holy lives of service until the day of your promised coming. You have done great things, O God. **Holy...**

A: For families, that physical and emotional distances be bridged, and that we reflect your ever-present love and willingness to forgive in all our relationships. You have done great things, O God. **Holy...**

P: You are indeed holy, O Lord. We praise you for the great things you have done and for your continued inspiration in our daily lives. We commend all our prayers to you through Jesus' name. **Amen**

## Or [9]

### *Presider or deacon*

As we wait with pregnant expectation for the coming of Jesus, let us offer prayers to God who sends his Son in the womb of a virgin.

### *Deacon or other leader*

For the peace of the world, and for our unity in Christ.

For *N* our bishop and all bishops, for the presbyters, for the deacons and all who minister in Christ, and for all the holy people of God.

For the church throughout the world and the faithful in every place.

For the leaders of the nations and all in authority.

For justice, peace, and freedom among peoples of the earth.

For travelers, for the sick and the suffering, for the hungry and the oppressed, and for those in prison.

For the dying and the dead.

For our deliverance from all affliction, strife, and need.

Joining our voices with the blessed Virgin Mary and with all the saints and angels of God, let us offer ourselves and one another to the living God through Christ.

**To you, O Lord.**

### *Presider*

O Root of Jesse, who arises as a sign among all peoples, in whose presence kings stand silent and nations bow in worship, come and deliver us, and tarry not. Glory to you for ever.

## Notes

[1] James Luther Mays, *Micah: A Commentary*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976, p.116.

- [2] Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-150: A Commentary*. Augsburg Publishing House, 1989, p. 142.
- [3] Hugh Montefiore, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1964, p. 166.
- [4] Joel B. Green, "Hope from Unexpected Places," *Quarterly Review* Fall 2000, p. 337.
- [5] Bruce Malina & Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, p. 291.
- [6] *The Church Year: Calendar and Lectionary*. Prepared by the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship. Augsburg Publishing House, 1973, p. 51.
- [7] <http://www.worship.on.ca/text/rclc0001.txt>
- [8] [http://www.worship.on.ca/text/inter\\_c.txt](http://www.worship.on.ca/text/inter_c.txt)
- [9] <http://members.cox.net/oplater/prayer.htm>